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Being a Member of the Bleuler Family†

Tina Joos-Bleuler

Mura 348, CH - 7228 Schuders, Switzerland

I didn't know my grandfather, Eugen Bleuler (1857-1939), personally. He died a number of years before I was born. Everything I know about him was told to me by my father, Manfred Bleuler, Eugen's eldest son. He not only told me, but he also wrote it down: every Christmas I would receive a new chapter about our family history. In that way, I got to know and to treasure my grandfather.

Eugen Bleuler came from a long established Zollikon family. At that time, Zollikon was a rural community, more than an hour away from the city of Zurich. Today, Zollikon has become part of Zurich. For two to three centuries, Eugen Bleuler's forebears – and even his parents – lived modestly, as did most people in Zollikon. They earned their living partly from the land (wine-growing and livestock), and partly from processing silk. The city-dwellers used to buy the raw material and only they were allowed, right into the century before last, to sell on the produced silk. At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, the simple people living on the lakeshore too took an increasing interest in the developing sciences, and this was also the case for the Bleuler family. His parents lived most frugally so as to enable their children to have a good education. Furthermore, both families of Eugen Bleuler's parents were actively involved in public life and regularly took on administrative positions in the Zollikon community. Only after their only daughter, Eugen's sister, became ill, did their world start to become narrower. They were completely occupied with taking care of her.

Up until 1830, when a liberal revival movement, under the influence of the French Revolution, began in Switzerland too, Zollikon was still dominated administratively by the city of Zurich. Until that time, third level education was hardly possible for citizens living in the country communities. Only with the introduction of compulsory schooling and the founding of the university in 1833 was it open to all male citizens; women had to wait another 30 years. A university education remained unusual and uncommon right up until Bleuler's youth. The professorships were mostly occupied by foreigners. That meant that also the first professors of psychiatry, and the first directors of the psychiatric clinic, were German academics (Wilhelm Griesinger, Bernard von Gudden, Eduard Hitzig). The locals were disappointed that "their psychiatrists" couldn't speak with patients in their mother tongue (Swiss dialect). Moreover, the first directors of the clinic were more concerned with research and academic teaching, and, in the eyes of the local people, too little with the individual patient. It was out of this dissatisfaction – and so as to be able to better help his schizophrenic sister – that my grandfather's wish to become a psychiatrist arose, indeed to be a psychiatrist who would look after his patients in a more personal way.

Eugen Bleuler conducted his research with untiring diligence. Where he got the desire and skill for it is difficult to say. Maybe it was from the yearning of the country people for education, and an academic career, which for so many years had remained unfulfilled. In his childhood, his whole existence revolved around the down-to-earth and yet intellectually stimulating life of his extended family, which had a great regard for science and was well stocked with good books. It is said that, as a boy, he was very spirited and boisterous. At the *Gymnasium* he had excellent teachers who motivated him, and classmates who came from an intellectual milieu and who considered themselves born to be scientists. As a teenager, Eugen is said to have been out-going and active. He was a member of the student gymnastics club. His university friends gladly visited him at home, and he found the dance evenings, especially after the grape harvest, good fun. It was

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only after he had completed his studies, and then until the end of his life, that was he serious, conscientious and devoted to his work. As well as this, he also felt a lifelong responsibility towards his family of origin. He took care of his sister (after the death of his parents) in the Burghölzli, as part of his own family and a patient, until she died. Before that, he had been director and chief physician for twelve years at the Rheinau psychiatric clinic which he was unhappy to leave when, in 1898, he was nominated director of the Burghölzli university psychiatric clinic in Zurich. It was typical of his attitude that he was not at all delighted to accept this appointment; on the contrary, since he had been very close to his patients, it was only reluctantly that he left them behind in Rheinau. A principal reason for his accepting the offer in Zurich was the serious illness of both his parents whom he could scarcely visit from Rheinau. But they lived near the Burghölzli. After his father died, he organised a room for his mother in the Burghölzli, although she didn't get to use it, because she died shortly after her husband.

After he got married in 1901 to Hedwig Waser, whom he got to know as a fellow campaigner in the abstinence movement, what was most important to Eugen Bleuler, alongside his commitment to his work, was his obligation to his wife and five children. And although the interests of the couple were so different, my father describes their marriage as fulfilled and happy: his mother had been changeable in her mood, lively, and gregarious, sometimes jolly, sometimes sad, ever according to the circumstances, whereas his father had been serious, controlled, restrained, calm, always somewhat worried, and rather quiet. He was very exact and a lover of order, whereas she was quite volatile. What they had in common was an interest in people, psychology, social issues, and, especially, abstinence. Both loved literature, and they adored and treasured nature, the mountains, the sea, flowers and animals. Nature walks were a great pleasure for them. Until my father started school, they used to go, at holiday time, mostly just the two of them, into the mountains. My father always remembered the excitement with which they used to tell, on their return, of the scenery they had experienced, their radiant faces when they were being welcomed back, and their handing over little mementos such as butterflies, feathers, pressed flowers, and fruit. Later they used to spend their holidays together with the children, often in Quinten. In 1913, they undertook their longest journey and only world tour, which lasted about two months. Bleuler had been invited to the opening of a clinic in Baltimore by Adolf Meyer, who was Swiss and also, at that time, a leading American psychiatrist. Thanks to the invitation and to some consultations, he was able to afford the long journey: from Calais by ship to Barbados and Jamaica, and then by train over the Central American isthmus to Panama, and back by train and banana boat to Baltimore. After the speeches, they travelled by train to the Niagara and then, by ship, back to Holland, where they visited some more towns. The children, who were still young, stayed behind in the Burghölzli in the care of maids, and they took great joy in the many letters they received from their parents.

During his whole Burghölzli time (1898-1927), Bleuler lived, first alone, and then with his wife and family, in the apartment designed for the director from the outset of clinic's construction, on the first floor of the main building – and in which I, many years afterwards, also grew up. The apartment was large and spacious. But good use was made of it, when one thinks that Bleuler made one room available to a junior doctor, and that he employed, at his own expense, a secretary, whose office, bedroom and living room were also in the apartment.

Family life in the Burghölzli was modest and simple, and it ran along regular lines. Bleuler passed through the apartment several times a day on his way to the doctors' office and back, from the ward on the women's side to the ward on the men's side. If his children met him in the apartment, he never stopped, but would utter kind and encouraging words – occasionally also chiding ones – to them. The whole family came together at mealtimes, and there were often lively discussions at table. Already in their schooldays, the children used to hear about Sigmund Freud and his teachings. Otherwise, because Bleuler also worked on Sundays, his children saw little of him. They were all the happier, therefore, on excursions made together or on rare holidays away. To save time, Bleuler always walked briskly, and he used to skip a step on the stairs. He used to carry his notebook with him in which he noted down what he wanted to talk about in his morning report. In another pocket he kept little sheets of notepaper, on which he recorded observations and thoughts, so as to put them in order later and use them as a basis for his scientific works.

My father learned from his own father an exceptional way of dealing with patients, trying to fully understand them for as long as they were together. Both parents had handed on to their children a certain frugality and a disdain for luxury goods. They were economical, but not austere. On the contrary, they were an example to their children of the ability to take pleasure in small material things. My father and his siblings found Eugen Bleuler tender and kind. His subordinates in the Burghölzli, however, sometimes characterised him as severe and strict. He had clear and precise ideas about life and morality. He had little interest in the Church and religion. Both Eugen and Hedwig Bleuler didn't usually go to Church, and there were no prayers said in the family. Both lived under the influence of the Enlightenment: one should live in this world, seek beauty and help others. Eugen Bleuler was critical of the time when theologians rather dogmatically imparted religious education, and children had to learn off the catechism by rote and without any understanding of it. He perceived the religiosity of many people as hypocrisy, although it never occurred

to either of them to leave the Church: membership belonged to order of things and to tradition. Bleuler deemed it all the more his duty to do right and to fulfil his responsibilities toward his family, patients and country. Socially, he was reserved, but he had life-long friends from his school and university days. Among the arts, it was, above all, poetry that was closest to his heart, and classical literature meant a lot to him.

Through this account of some details from my grandfather's life, I have become close to him – even if I never experienced him personally. I marvel at his untiring diligence and dedication to his patients. I haven't included an appreciation of my grandfather's scientific works. I will leave that to others who understand them more than I do. I often imagine to myself how difficult it must have been to work academically with only a typewriter, no computer, although with considerably less red tape and bureaucracy than today. But perhaps that was exactly the secret of his success: Eugen Bleuler took the time to devote himself completely to his patients – without thereby neglecting his family.

What does it mean to me to be descended from two distinguished psychiatrists? Quite deliberately I decided long ago not to study medicine, but agronomy. As a psychiatrist I would have found it difficult to be independent, and I could scarcely have fulfilled the high expectations. The pressure would have been a burden. Of altogether nine grandchildren of Eugen Bleuler, only one became a psychiatrist. But, as a child growing up in the same, albeit smaller, director's apartment, I felt at home in the Burghölzli. The farm attached to it, with its cows, horses and pigs, already fascinated me back then. I have fond memories of our garden, of the park belonging to the clinic, the Burghölzli hill, and the huge building, where there was always something to discover. We celebrated festivities together with the patients and all the staff, and I felt part of it all – it was like an extended family. I learned from my father to treat people and, above all, mental patients, with dignity and respect. On the other hand, I used to completely repress justified and unjustified criticism of psychiatry and its difficulties. I felt too personally attacked by it.

I myself have been living for years as a mountain farmer in a little mountain village in the Bündner Alps. This rather different world has removed me, in terms of my interests, from the realm of psychiatry, but I still have many pleasant memories of my childhood and youth.